Maharlika

PINOY LIFE IN THE MARIANAS

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Fishing: Pinoys favorite pastime

Fishing is perhaps one of the most favorite weekend pastimes of Filipino workers on Saipan. They can be seen standing like poles at daytime along the shores of Beach Road.

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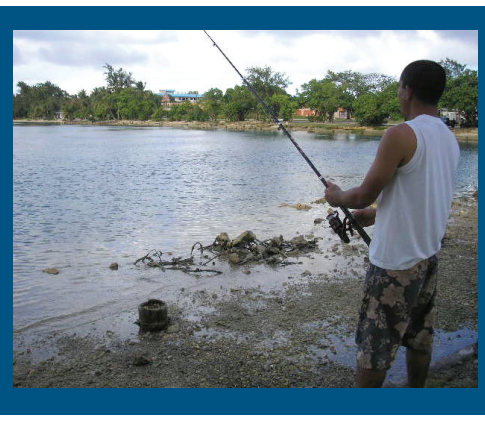

Iconic style

The very first fashion icons were probably none other than Cleopatra, Delilah, Eve and Maria Clara (no, not Audrey, Jackie or Grace!). All four women, legendary or not, are remembered for the significant roles they played during their times, and their very distinct looks.

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US allows nursing license exams in RP

Thousands of Filipino nurses hoping to work in the United States will no longer have to travel abroad to take licensing exams after winning approval to sit the tests in their home country, the government announced Thursday.

"This is very good news for Filipino nurses, nursing students and the nursing profession," President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo's spokesman, Ignacio Bunye, said in a statement. "This is a landmark in the history of the Filipino nursing profession."

Bunye said approval from the US National Council of State Boards of Nursing to hold its licensing exams in Manila, would mean "huge savings and great convenience" for Filipino nurses hoping to land a job in the US.

Nurses from the Philippines—the largest source of foreign-registered nurses in US hospitals and healthcare facilities—have to travel to Hong Kong, Saipan or other Asian cities to take the exams, Bunye said.

Jennifer Gonzales, deputy executive director of the Council for Overseas Filipinos, said the first exams would likely be held in six months.

About 25,518 Filipino nurses holding combined immigrant visas and work permits traveled to the United States to work between 1988 and May 2006, according to the council. Adding those holding only working visas would push the number much higher, Gonzales said.

An earlier plan to allow Filipinos to take the exams at home was aborted following a cheating scandal in the local nursing board exams last year, in which questions

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Arroyo

AP

POLITICAL KILLINGS

Protesters display placards and pictures of alleged victims of political killings during a rally coinciding with the visit of United Nations special rapporteur on extrajudicial killings Philip Alston Tuesday, Feb. 13, 2007 in front of the headquarters of the Philippine Armed Forces in Quezon City north of Manila, Philippines. A local human rights group, Karapatan, has listed 832 summary killings, including 356 left-wing activists, since Philippine President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo took office in 2001, as government officials tried to downplay the impressions that security forces were behind the killings. ***See story on Page 2.***

'No partial retake, no migration to US'

By VERONICA UY
INQUIRER.NET

The Professional Regulation Commission (PRC) said on Thursday it needs to study how to respond to the US position that nurses who passed the June 2006 licensure exam cannot migrate there unless they retake portions of the test that were leaked.

Interviewed by phone, PRC chairperson Leonor Tripon-Rosero confirmed the Commission on Graduates of Foreign Nursing Schools (CGF-

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DOLE issues alert on CNMI crackdown vs illegal workers

By MARCONI CALINDAS
REPORTER

Brion

The Philippine Department of Labor and Employment has warned Filipinos against seeking jobs in the CNMI without passing through proper channels, citing reports of a crackdown on overstaying foreign workers in the Commonwealth.

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PINOYNEWS

International trade unions: RP has most political killings in Asia

By EDSON C. TANDOC JR.
INQUIRER

The Philippines has the biggest number of extrajudicial killings among Asian countries, members of an international group of trade unions who are on a fact-finding mission here said.

Katsuhiko Sato, regional secretary for Asia and the Pacific of the group Public Services International, said that while human rights abuses were also reported in countries such as Nepal and Sri Lanka, the biggest number of summary executions in the region have taken place in the Philippines.

He did not cite specific or comparable figures, however.

The PSI bills itself as a global group of public service unions with 20 million members in more than 150 countries.

In a statement, the PSI said of the 800 victims of extrajudicial killings reported in the country last year, at least 80 were members of trade unions.

"This level of killings and violations of human rights are unacceptable," Nick Sigler, international relations secretary of Unison, the biggest trade union in Great Britain, said in a press conference.

But what is alarming is that the killers seem to be getting away with it, PSI general secretary Hans Engelberts said at the same news conference.

"It is already outrageous that so many people are being killed, but it is more outrageous that the government is not bringing these people [killers] to justice," Engelberts also told reporters in a hotel in Mandaluyong City.

The PSI delegation warned that unless the bloodshed was stopped, they would ask their own governments and foreign lending institutions to pressure the government to stop the killings, most of which have been blamed by militant and human rights groups on the government's security forces.

For instance, they could pressure the World Bank not to grant loans to "governments which allow these things to happen," Engelberts said.

"These senseless deaths are killing trade union and human rights in the country. These senseless deaths are also killing democracy which is vital to sustainable economic growth," the PSI statement said.

Engelberts likened the situation here to Colombia, which has also been swept by a wave of killings.

He and 12 other international trade union officials are here on a five-day fact-finding mission triggered by the spate of extrajudicial killings in the country.

The team has already met with the Commission on Human Rights, the Ombudsman, the Civil Service Commission, the Department of Labor and Employment and non-government organizations.

Sigler said he noted one problem after these meetings: "There seems to be confusion about responsibility. This confusion is leading to inaction."

Engelberts, who is visiting the country for the fourth time, said the problem of extrajudicial killings in the country was also "getting worse."

He said what was more alarming here was the prevailing "climate of fear" and observed that the local belief in the country being one of the freest in the world was just a "fairy tale."

His group also met with United Nations special rapporteur Philip Alston, who is also here to investigate the extrajudicial killings.

PSI agreed with militant groups that the government should release the findings of the Melo Commission, formed seven months ago to probe the murders.

Palace adamant vs releasing 'incomplete' Melo report

By LIRA DALANGIN-FERNANDEZ
INQUIRER.NET

Malacañang on Thursday stood pat on its decision to withhold what it insists is an incomplete, therefore "inconclusive," Melo Commission report.

But Press Secretary Ignacio Bunye stressed that the government is cooperating with the European Commission and a visiting United Nations (UN) team that is conducting its own investigation into the killings of activists and journalists.

"The government intends to work closely with the UN to get at the root of the matter, although we have held the first Melo report from distribution because it is still incomplete and, at this point, inconclusive," Bunye said

Eneko Landaburu, director general for external relations of the European Commission (EC), which like the UN has also been invited to look into the killings, had earlier asked for a copy of the Melo Commission report.

At the same time, Bunye said the government welcomed the cooperation of the families of the victims of extrajudicial killings with the UN Commission on Human Rights team lead by Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions Philip Alston.

"This will complete the picture that the Melo Commission could not understandably achieve in view of the refusal of the families to testify before the probe body," Bunye said.

The victims' relatives and the activist groups to which many of the victims belonged had refused to cooperate with the Melo Commission, suspecting the creation of the panel to be part of a government ploy to cover up the involvement of state security forces in the killings.

US ALLOWS

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from two of five test subjects were leaked.

More than 17,000 of the over 42,000 who took the exams in June passed, but the Court of Appeals ordered 1,600 to retake the tests in December, said Leonor Rosero, head of the Professional Regulation Commission. Only 1,200 took the exams again and about 1,000 passed, she said.

At least 19 people -- two nursing board examiners and 17 officers of test review centers -- are facing criminal charges in connection with the leaks, said Elfren Meneses, chief of the anti-fraud and computer crimes division of the National Bureau of Investigation.

The Philippine Overseas Employment Administration reported 7,768 nurses went abroad to work in 2005, down from 12,822 in 2001.

The top six countries that employ Filipino nurses are Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Britain, Taiwan, Ireland and the United States. ***(PDI//Associated Press)***

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NS) decision that passers in "the compromised licensure exam of June 2006 are not eligible for a VisaScreen Certificate."

However, Rosero said a retake would be required only for those of the 17,000 nursing graduates who passed the June exam "who seek immigrant visas, unlike those who take the NCLEX (National Council Licensure Examination) which is for those seeking working visas to the US."

The CGFNS decision came less than a week after the US approved the Philippines' application to be a testing center for the NCLEX, which is expected to be given in Manila within the year.

"Although a PRC license is not needed to practice in the US, it is needed for those who seek an immigrant visa," she added.

In an e-mail, the CGFNS urged Philippine authorities to provide an opportunity for the June board passers to retake tests 3 and 5 "without surrender of licensure" to allow them to qualify for the VisaScreen Certificate.

The June nursing licensure exam was marred the discovery that questions to tests 3 and 5 had been leaked and given to nursing graduates enrolled in a few review centers.

Although there was a bitter debate over whether all the examinees would have to retake the leaked tests, eventually 17,000 examinees were declared to have passed the board exam and allowed to take their oaths after it was decided that they had not benefited from the leak.

The CGFNS sent a fact-finding mission to the Philippines in September 2006 to look into the scandal.

It concluded that the June licensure exam "raises questions about the accurate assessment of the competencies of many of those individuals" who took the test and made it "unable to certify that the licensure is comparable to a US license."

"In this instance, applicable US immigration law will not permit CGFNS to issue the VisaScreen Certificate required of internationally educated health care workers to those nurses who obtained Philippine licensure on the basis of passing the June 2006 nursing licensure examination."

The CGFNS, which evaluates candidates under US immigration law, argued that the integrity of foreign licensing systems ultimately affects the health and safety of patients in the United States.

The CGFNS is an immigration-neutral, nonprofit organization with 30 years of experience in certifying the credentials of over 450,000 internationally educated nurses and other healthcare workers.

DOLE

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In a public notice issued last week, Labor and Employment Secretary Arturo D. Brion said that "the recent crackdown" on illegal workers in the CNMI was part of the efforts of the Commonwealth to control immigration and flush out illegal aliens in view of the possible federal takeover of CNMI labor and immigration.

Brion advised Filipinos to be cautious and not to be lured by unscrupulous individuals and agencies that could promise them jobs in the CNMI or any other country overseas without the acquisition of proper documents such as job contracts and work visa.

"I asked the workers to check first with the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration and its regional units the existence of job orders of individuals and agencies who are offering them overseas jobs," Brion said.

According to DOLE, the Philippine Overseas Labor Office on Saipan reported to Labor and Employment Secretary Arturo D. Brion that the CNMI Department of Labor has recently published a list of nonresident workers that are illegally staying and subsequently facing deportation in the Commonwealth.

The list, which was published at Saipan Tribune, consisted of names of foreign workers whose contracts have already expired and failed to find jobs within the 45-day transfer period but continued to remain in the CNMI.

The list, however, contained errors as it included names of people who have either left the island or have successfully completed their application process.

The list contained some 1,000 names of individuals from China, Japan, Korea, Philippines, and Thailand among many others.

UNO 'guest candidates' may be junked

By DONA PAZZIBUGAN, CHRISTIAN V. ESGUERRA
INQUIRER

The opposition's "guest candidates"—Senate President Manuel Villar and Sen. Francis Pangilinan—may be "junked" on election day if they do not carry the rest of the ticket, the campaign spokesperson for the opposition's senatorial slate said Thursday.

Some opposition leaders have reportedly complained about requiring them to campaign for Villar and Pangilinan, when the two were not rooting for the entire slate.

Villar will attend the proclamation rally of the opposition's Genuine Opposition senatorial ticket, the slate's campaign spokesperson told the Philippine Daily Inquirer Thursday night.

Adel Tamano, spokesperson for the coalition, added that Pangilinan was also likely to attend the ticket's coming-out party.

"Manny Villar is already 100-percent sure. As for Pangilinan, an announcement will be made by Sen. Franklin Drilon," Tamano told the Inquirer.

Tamano said the Genuine Opposition's proclamation rally is scheduled for Feb. 24 somewhere in Makati City.

"It will probably be at the University of Makati but that has yet to be final," Tamano said.

Villar and Pangilinan are running as independent candidates while fellow "Wednesday Group" members, Senators Joker Arroyo and Ralph Recto, joined the administration lineup.

"If on their part, they would junk the rest and they do not carry our candidates, then on the ground, on the local level, there might be some repercussions," Tamano told reporters in the Senate.

As of Thursday, Tamano had been saying that the opposition would "actively" campaign for Villar and Pangilinan.

He said it would be unfair if Villar and Pangilinan campaigned for senatorial candidates of the administration's Team Unity.

Villar on Thursday kept his promise to join other opposition candidates in the campaign when he hosted lunch for them in a restaurant in a Las Piñas City shopping mall. Villar owns the mall.

He and his wife, Las Piñas Rep. Cynthia Villar, leased Dencio's Restaurant at Star Mall for the lunch with UNO's senatorial candidates -- Tarlac Rep. Benigno "Noynoy" Aquino III, Sonia Roco, Loren Legarda, Aquilino "Koko" Pimentel III, John Osmeña and Nikki Coseteng -- and campaign managers San Juan Mayor Joseph Victor Ejercito and Makati Mayor Jejomar Binay.

Pangilinan has been noncommittal about joining the sorties of the opposition.

Labor secretary censures recruiters for misinforming domestic helpers

By JEROME ANING
INQUIRER

Labor Secretary Arturo Brion denounced recruiters on Thursday for allegedly manipulating domestic helpers in their ongoing campaign against new regulations for maids' deployment overseas.

"Recruiters [should stop] inciting, and using for their exceeding profit and other dubious purposes, the disadvantaged workers and their families who bear the social costs, in pushing their opposition against the new policies issued to uplift their employment conditions overseas," the labor department said in a statement.

On Tuesday, recruiters, domestic workers, applicants and their supporters staged another huge rally at the Department of Labor and Employment office in Manila to oppose the new regulations.

Brion said that while DoLE would tolerate the rallies, "we believe that the main duty of recruitment agencies, provided they are licensed and their associations are legitimate, is neither to incite nor gather people to mass protest, but to respect the rules ensuring quality jobs and just conditions of work for our disadvantaged household service workers (HSWs) abroad."

"Misinformation is tantamount to misuse and abuse," he added.

The labor secretary said he had mobilized the country's labor attaches abroad "to resist and counteract the insidious effects of recruiters engaged in cutthroat competition and out to maximize their profits from the recruitment of would-be domestics."

Brion also denied the claims of recruiters that new US$400 minimum salary of HSWs, raised from the previous $200, would be detrimental to opportunities overseas.

The Philippine Overseas Employment Administration had received job orders under the new $400 standard, he said, adding, "It is appalling that certain groups, through misinformation, would still make them desperately hang on to the much lower pay scales that also made them vulnerable to ill-treatment and abuses overseas."

FAME and maids' groups are opposed to the doubling of the basic wage, the increasing of minimum age of deployment from 21 to 23, the non-collection of placement fees from recruits, and the mandatory training and assessment for those applicants.

They labeled the certification requirement as "pure extortion" and said the doubled wages would lower the demand for Filipino maids abroad.

Fishing: Pinoys favorite pastime

By FERDIE P. DE LA TORRE
REPORTER

Fishing is perhaps one of the most favorite weekend pastimes of Filipino workers on Saipan.

These workers can be seen standing like poles during daytime along the shores of Beach Road, Fishing Base, Sugar Dock, and other beaches.

Ernie Villalas, 38, a pest control technician, said he would rather go fishing instead of watching TV, play poker, and visit night clubs.

"Fishing is my favorite pastime for a year now. It fights boredom and it's really enjoyable. If you have enough catch, you don't need to buy fish from the store," said Villalas in an interview with Maharlika at Fishing Base in Garapan.

Just like many other Pinoy fishing-enthusiasts on island, Villalas learned the ropes of rod and reel fishing when he got here a few years back.

"I grew up in Talisay, Cebu, but our beach is not a fishing area so I didn't try fishing there," said the technician, who has been on the island for three years now.

His wife and daughter are based in Manila.

The Cebuano worker is comfortable fishing at Fishing Base because of its proximity to his barracks in Garapan. He would just grab his bike to reach his favorite spot in a few minutes.

Villalas said Fishing Base is safe, has plenty of trees, and there's a lot of fish too.

He purchased his rod and reel for only $30. He would usually use squids and small shrimps as baits.

"I would usually catch mafute and if lucky, talaketuk," he said.

The new hobby, Villalas pointed out, easily kills his free time and effectively fights homesickness.

"I just love fishing. I would spend one to two hours thrice a week here at Fishing Base," said the worker as he slowly pulled the bait for the day's third catch—a small mafute.

FERDIE DE LA TORRE

Ernie Villalas prefers spending his free-time by fishing at Fishing Base in Garapan.

LABOR FRONT

Cancellation of employer's bond

By FERDIE P. DE LA TORRE
REPORTER

Q: What should a bond provider do to cancel an employee's bond?

A: The Labor director must be notified in writing on any attempt to cancel a bond. Bond providers canceling bonds without written permission from the Labor director or his or her designee will be liable for any claims made against the bond.

■ ■ ■

Q: What will happen if an employer's bond is cancelled without an authorization from the Department of Labor?

A: Any employer whose bond is cancelled without written permission from Labor at any time prior to the expiration of an alien worker's employment contract covered by the bond will be subject to sanctions provided for in the Nonresident Worker's Act and immediate cancellation of all permits issued to that employer. According to the CNMI Alien Labor Rules and Regulations, any alien worker whose permit is cancelled due to cancellation of the bond should be given expiration transfer relief.

■ ■ ■

Q: Are changes in the terms and conditions of a bond allowed?

A: No change in the terms and conditions of a bond shall be permitted unless they are described specifically in a letter request to the Labor director that details the proposed changes. No change will be enforceable in the absence of a specific letter request that has been approved.

According to the Alien Labor Rules and Regulations, no changes in the terms and conditions of the bond shall be effective unless and it is approved in writing by the Labor director or his or her designee.

■ ■ ■

Submit questions on labor issues to *Saipan Tribune* via e-mail at editor@saipantribune.com, or by calling 235-6397, 235-2440, or 235-8747 and leaving a message at Ext. 133 or 135. You may also submit questions in person by writing it down and dropping it off at the *Saipan Tribune*'s office on the second floor of the CIC Centre on Beach Road, Garapan.

Remittances hit record high in 2006 at $12.8B

Money sent home by Filipinos working abroad rose 37.2 percent to $1.3 billion in December, bringing accumulated remittances for the whole of last year to a record $12.8 billion, the central bank said on Thursday.

Pushed from the Philippines by poverty and lack of opportunity, around 10 percent of the country's 86 million people work abroad, breathing life into the national economy by fueling consumer spending.

The central bank said in a statement Filipinos sent back $1.3 billion through banks and other formal channels in December.

That took the total 2006 amount to $12.8 billion, up 19.4 percent from 2005 and beating estimates for $12.3 billion.

Total remittances could be at least 10 percent higher if they included cash sent home with relatives and friends, analysts say, though the central bank hopes to halve that "leakage" to five percent this year.

The central bank said December's increase was partly due to banks capturing a wider share of transfers and a rise in the number of Filipinos seeking work abroad as nurses, nannies, sailors, laborers and musicians.

"The strong inflows of cash remittances can be traced mainly to higher deployment of Filipino workers abroad and to financial institutions' adoption of innovative ways to improve delivery of financial services," the central bank said.

Preliminary data from the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration showed the number of Filipinos working abroad between January and December 2006 rose 10.5 percent to 1.1 million from the same period in 2005.

The amount of remittances coursed through banks and other remittance centers was expected to reach $13.5 billion in 2007. ***(PDI/Reuters)***

Study: RP diaspora widens poverty gap

Billions of dollars in remittances by its huge overseas work force are lifting many areas of the Philippines out of poverty but millions more are being left behind, according to a study obtained by AFP Thursday.

Manila and five other regions that account for most of the labor exports also have the country's lowest poverty levels, and five of these areas showed significant drops in poverty levels between 2000 and 2003, said the paper by University of Santo Tomas professor Alvin Ang.

However, poverty levels increased to between 34 percent to 49 percent in those regions where labor export is not a principal preoccupation, the study said, citing government data.

The government estimates 30 percent of the Philippines population are poor. But World Bank data show nearly 40 percent of Filipinos live on two dollars a day or less.

Ang's paper said the results support the hypothesis "that those who are migrating and working abroad are not poor" and that the remittances, which reached a record 10.7 billion dollars in 2005, "have multiplier effects in terms of education, health, housing, (and) entrepreneurship" among others.

However, "instead of levelling the regional poverty levels, it probably contributes to its worsening" in areas where workers do not have the proper skills as well as the resources to move overseas.

The Philippines started large-scale exports of construction workers and seamen in the 1970s amid a building boom in the oil-soaked Middle East.

Ang said deployments shifted in favor of lower-skilled service workers, including domestics, with the emergence of the so-called "tiger" economies of Asia by the late 1980s.

Since the 1990s, the information technology revolution and the graying populations of much of the developed world opened up job opportunities for highly skilled Filipino professionals and technical workers.

He said this raised the per capita annual remittance levels by more than 500 percent to nearly 11,000 dollars in 2005 compared to about 2,000 dollars in 1988.

Since most of the migrating workers "are from relatively affluent regions, they may be worsening inequality among regions," Ang concluded.

He also raised concern that the remittance money flows "are causing sharp declines in agricultural production" because "it seems that labor would rather wait for the opportunity to (work abroad) than work in the farms."

He also said the huge capital flow "have yet to be translated to value-added activities and investments which are more foundational sources of development and growth." ***(PDI/Agence France-Presse)***

All candidates must undergo drug test—Comelec

The Commission on Elections (Comelec) has ordered mandatory drug tests for all candidates in the mid-term elections but shied away from penalizing those who fail to comply with its directive.

"All candidates for public office, both national and local, in the May 14, 2007 synchronized national and local elections shall undergo mandatory drug test in government forensic laboratories or any drug testing laboratories monitored and accredited by the Department of Health," according to a new resolution posted on Comelec's blog.

The Comelec, in its resolution, said the order was based on the Constitution and on Republic Act 9165 or the Dangerous Drugs Act of 2002.

The Comelec cited Section 1, Article 11 of the 1987 Constitution, which states: "Public officers and employees must at all times be accountable to the people, serve them with utmost responsibility, integrity, loyalty, and efficiency."

It also cited Section 36(g) of RA 9165, which says that "testing shall be done by any government forensic laboratory or drug testing laboratory accredited by the Department of Health."

Section (g) further states that "all candidates for public office whether appointed or elected both in the national and local government shall undergo mandatory drug test," according to the resolution.

Thus, the Comelec requires that all candidates submit a drug test certificate to the offices of the poll body, according to the resolution. ***(PDI)***

Jolo's 'Highway of Death' now boulevard of dreams

By FE ZAMORA
INQUIRER

Jolo town center.

JOLO, SULU—Once known as the Highway of Death, Danag Road which traverses Patikul and Panamao now teems with life: clusters of children strolling to school, farmers drying coconut meat on roadsides for copra, and houses bustling with men tying abaca fibers into bales.

Across the street where stands a concrete memorial to Brig. Gen. Teodulfo Bautista and 33 officers and men who were massacred along this road on Oct. 10, 1977, a group of women busy themselves with their laundry, water running generously from a deep-well pump.

At the barangay health center beside the memorial, mothers with babies await their turn with a midwife, the closest thing to a doctor they have, at least for now.

Driving across Patikul after 7 p.m. used to be a race for life, with gunmen seeming to lurk behind every tree. Not anymore. The once dark, desolate and dangerous road now boasts of houses where, at night, in scenes never seen before, families gather around television sets.

No longer a ghost town

"Patikul is not a ghost town anymore," Marine Brig. Gen. Juancho Sabban told the Inquirer.

In September, Sabban's troops scored one of their biggest successes by killing Abu Sayyaf chieftain Khadaffy Janjalani in a gunfight in a remote village, leaving the bandit group without a leader.

Surprises

Now the Highway of Death has become a source of life, with communities enriched with basic services - water, electricity, public education and medical assistance.

More surprises await the visitor. After sundown, the plaza across from the provincial capitol blooms with colored lights, two fountains, and pop music from a sound system.

The imposing, mosque-inspired, all-white capitol serves as a backdrop to the Jolo wonderland.

Children at play

At daytime, children play on a see-saw or swing, even a skating rink. The wide road has become the perfect venue for teenagers taking driving lessons.

An open-air café serves native pastries like pastil and junay to go with soda, tea or coffee. Entrepreneur Nida Sale, 45, who owns one of the cafés, said she earns as much as P3,000 on weekdays, and P4,000 on Saturday nights, when the plaza stays lighted until near midnight.

"That's net income. Besides, I don't pay rent for the space. The governor has given it for free," Sale said.

Changing the image

"Our goal is to remove the image of Sulu as a dangerous place," Gov. Benjamin Loong painted his vision for the province.

Since his election as governor in 2004, Loong has been leading a campaign to erase Sulu's reputation as the "kidnapping capital," earned from the kidnapping by the Abu Sayyaf of 21 mostly foreign tourists from a diving resort on Sipadan Island, Malaysia in 2000.

A year later the Abu Sayyaf also kidnapped American missionaries Martin and Gracia Burnham and 18 others from the Dos Palmas resort in Palawan.

By 2002, US Special Forces had entered the fight, taking active part in efforts to recover the hostages and crush the Abu Sayyaf.

The presence of the Americans seemed to appeal to the local Muslims. At a medical mission in Latih Elementary School along Danag Road, about ten American troopers, including a Fil-Am who spoke fluent Filipino, and a Spanish-American who understood Chavacano, mingled freely with the residents.

Sgt. Tim Meyer, spokesperson for the Americans under the Joint Special Operations Task Forces, maintained that the US troops were there strictly for non-combat operations.

"There are a lot of people who do not want us here, that's why they make up stories," Meyer said. "This is still about winning hearts and minds, but we are bolder in the sense that we go for the personal touch," General Sabban said.

Matchbooks, bottled water

Entertainment is part of the town's daily activities.

While waiting for their turn at the dental clinic, children and adults watch the film "The Message: The Story of Islam," a Hollywood production starring Anthony Quinn and Irene Papas. The film has been dubbed in Tausug.

Filipino soldiers distribute posters, comic books about how it is to live life in peace, and matchbooks with the pictures of wanted terrorists Dulmatin (reward: P550 million) and Jainal Antel Sali Jr. (reward: P275 million).

Also printed on the matchbooks are telephone numbers to call or send text messages to for free in case of sightings of either of the two terrorists.

Last year the troops distributed bottled water with a picture of Janjalani and telephone numbers to call pasted on the label.

Welcome to cyberspace

The US presence is also felt in the so-called enclaves of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), the Muslim group that signed a peace deal with Manila in 1996.

At the Panamao National High School, teenagers crowd around ten computers as they receive basic lessons on the new technology and access to the Internet via a satellite provided by the US troops.

In Luuk town, about 50 km from here, carpenters put finishing touches on two school buildings funded by the US government. The town's five-year development program includes a fish port, cold storage, and a well-lit boulevard similar to the Baywalk in Manila.

Tres Palmas

Reinventing Sulu's so-called blood-soaked beaches—a label earned from numerous battles on the beaches since Spanish colonization—and promoting the area as a tourist haven may yet provide the ultimate makeover for this island province.

Already the Marines have developed a resort they have dubbed Tres Palmas, a take-off on Dos Palmas resort in Palawan, where the Burnhams and their companions were snatched by the Abu Sayyaf group six years ago.

Like its counterpart in Palawan, Tres Palmas has a boardwalk that leads to a hut in the middle of the water. The Marines have dubbed sections of the beach "Boracay" and "Dakak," after the country's famous beach resorts frequented by tourists from all over the world.

The message is clear: With peace and development Sulu has what it takes to be at par with the world's best.

PINOYSTYLE

Bong Revilla, rumored ex on same flight

By DOLLY ANNE CARVAJAL
INQUIRER

Bong revilla may deny this, but a mutual friend of ours saw him en route to Hong Kong last Friday on the same flight that a rumored ex—beauty queen Josephine Canonizado—took. Ex-es of a feather fly together?

Heard that Josephine Canonizado changed her last name to Ortiz when she was launched as an endorser for a whitening cream along with Daisy Reyes. Their billboard is across Megamall. Since Josephine had earlier been pinpointed as an ex of Bong's (he is said to have given her a beauty parlor), maybe she wanted to avoid name recall. Is she just playing a name game or playing with fire?

Drunken brawl

KC Montero, Jojo Manlongat and some friends caused a commotion in Pier One at The Fort. They were seen picking a fight with other customers. Was it just a drunken brawl or did someone get on KC's nerves and he went ballistic? Celebs chilling out should freeze their temper to avoid reaching boiling point 'cause all eyes are on them.'

Rocky marriage

Many viewers noticed that Kris Aquino and James Yap were not all that sweet during her birthday celebration on "The Buzz." Kris even choked on tears as she thanked her son, Josh, for standing by her during what she described as difficult times. Could there be some truth to the loudest whisper in show biz about trouble brewing in the James and Kris marriage?

This may just be a phase they're going through, more so because Kris is preggy. Infanticipation brings a lot of inexplicable irritants. If the path is rocky just now, I'm sure Kris and James can use those rocks, so to speak, to build a stronger foundation instead of throwing those stones at each other.

Many Valentine babies like Kris are known to endure the unendurable for love.

Solar shows

It was such a delight to be a guest on Jullie Yap Daza's TV special last Sunday. It's just the first of many interesting TV shows that Solar Entertainment has lined up on RPN 9. They are gearing up for a grand launch soon. It's a welcome alternative to the never-ending battle between the Kapamilya and Kapuso networks. Shine on, Solar!

Bong Revilla and Lani Mercado

Chinese new year

Mandarin Oriental, Manila stages its trademark Chinese New Year festivities tomorrow, starting 11 p.m. on the dawning of the Year of the Yin Fire Pig. The auspicious merrymaking activities, which offer revelers a chance to win a Hong Kong holiday for two with accommodations at The Excelsior, are designed to augur good fortune and bring good chi as spearheaded by Hong Kong-based geomancer Joseph Chau.

Kung Hei Fat OINK!!

High-tech deal

Mojo Pacific Media (MPM) and ABC 5 join forces to produce revolutionary TV game and reality shows, provide Interactive TV (ITV) services, Internet-enabled services and other value-added services. MPM is a joint venture of Pinoy-owned Pacific Technomedia and US-based Mojo Mediaworks, which has projects with Fox Network, ESPN and Randy Jackson Productions (of "American Idol"), among others. They are launching Slingo, an interactive trivia game show, in March.

New bands

The Drizzle band has brought all the diversities and artistic attractions from its native Cagayan de Oro in its debut album "Love Without Logic" (Galaxy Records). The album includes "Ikaw Lang," "Silly Games" and "Foolish Love." Catch the band in SM Bacoor (today).

Actress Alma Moreno star-struck over Escudero

Alma Moreno

By MAILA AGER
INQUIRER.NET

Even movie stars have their own idols and actress Alma Moreno was no exception.

Moreno, Vanessa Lacsamana in real life, had gone to the assembly area in Parañaque City where she was hoping to meet her favorite opposition senatorial candidate -- Congressman Francis "Chiz" Escudero.

Moreno openly declared her admiration for Escudero, who, she said, was "intelligent and eloquent."

"Kaya ko gusto si Senator Chiz kasi unang-una napakatalino. Pag pinapanood mo sa TV, ang galling, galing niyang magsalita, maski galit na galit siya [I want Senator Chiz because first, he is intelligent. When you watch him on TV, he speaks well even when he is angry]," said the actress who was hoping to have a picture with Escudero.

"At saka ang galing, galing niya. Kaya gusto kong magpa-picture sa kanya [And he's really good. That's why I want us to have a picture together]," she said.

"Hinihintay ko nga si Chiz kasi gusto kong magpa-picture [I am waiting for Chiz because I want to have a picture with him]," Moreno told reporters before the start of the opposition's motorcade in Parañaque.

Moreno, who is running for councilor in the city under the opposition, will also join the motorcade.

But Moreno said she was not inclined to support her colleague, actor and TV host Richard Gomez, who is running for senator as an independent.

"Masakit man, masakit sa loob ko…pero kailangan priority ko ngayon yung UNO [United Opposition], yung partido namin [It pains me, it really pains me… but my priority now is UNO, our party]" she said.

Moreno said she has decided to run for councilor although her supporters and her mayor, Pablo Olivares, had been prodding her to run for vice mayor.

She said that as much as possible she did not want to run against her friend and incumbent Vice Mayor Anjo Yllana.

"Si Anjo ngayon ang vice mayor...Siya na ang nandyan, kung maaari wag na kaming magkakasakitan [Anjo now is the vice mayor. He is there. As much as possible, we do not want to hurt each other]," she said.

Moreno ran for Parañaque mayor but lost during the 2004 election.

LJ: Life's a beach

By BAYANI SAN DIEGO JR.
INQUIRER

Although she seems girlish and giggly on TV, Lourna Jane "LJ" Reyes is already running a household at the tender age of 19.

Believe it or not, she also has a "mature" side.

Fortunately, older sister Lorraine and a staff keep her company since mom Lalaine is working in the United States.

LJ believes their current home set-up is a great training ground for the future.

"I am studying and working at the same time," she relates. "Since I'm now earning, I take care of my own bills. I'm in charge of the salaries of my production assistant and driver. This prepares me for living on my own."

As testament to her grit and grace, LJ, who is currently seen on GMA-7 shows "S.O.P." and "Makita Ka Lang Muli," landed on the dean's list in De La Salle, where she's taking up Economics and Management of Financial Institutions.

"It's [sometimes] hard, but it's [really] just a matter of time management," she says.

On top of all this, she also recently set up a small business, Popoy's Grill on Commonwealth.

The budding businesswoman is also an amateur decorator.

She designed her bedroom, combining two rooms and turning them into her sleeping quarters, dressing/makeup room and walk-in closet.

"Every little detail was my personal choice. I chose the fabric for the Roman shades and the blue paint for the walls," she relates.

LJ explains that she chose baby blue because it reminds her of the ocean. "The beach has a calming effect on me."

Sand from Boracay and seashells from everywhere are strewn all over the place, along with blue dolphin study lamps and a mermaid figurine from a Sea World Florida shop.

Even her bathroom has a beach motif—blue walls, seashell décor and marina-themed shower curtain.

She put in a sink in the makeup area. "That area used to be my old bathroom. During the renovation, I couldn't dismantle it because it would affect the entire structure of the house. So I retained the sink. Now, it serves as a mini-kitchen, where I keep chocolates and snacks," she points out.

The director's chair by her study table is a souvenir from "Starstruck," she shares.

LJ and her family moved in a year and a half ago.

"My mom chose the paintings, curtains and décor for the living and dining rooms, but she left our rooms to my sister and me," she says.

Even though it's far from school and the studio, LJ has grown fond of their home in the outskirts of Quezon City.

"It's very quiet and cool here at night. I don't see tall buildings, so I am not reminded of GMA-7. I'm far away from stress," LJ quips with a hearty laugh.

RP hopes to end unlucky streak in Mr. World pageant

By ARMIN ADINA
INQUIRER

It's the men's turn.

Amid all the fanfare surrounding the forthcoming Binibining Pilipinas pageant, Mister World-Philippines 2007 quietly unfolded, to select the country's representative to the Mister World competition in Sanya, China this March.

The international contest was last held in 2003 when Brazil's Gustavo Gianetti bagged the title.

The country has not been as fortunate in Mister World as it has been in the Miss World pageant. In the last five years, the Philippines landed in the semifinals or finals of the women's competition four times.

The 18 local candidates hope to end the Philippines' unlucky streak in the Mister World pageant. Miss World finalist Mafae Yunon, who attended the press presentation last week at the Manila Pavillion hotel in Manila, said she had "high hopes for this year's batch of contestants."

Crowd favorite Peiman Gomari declared, "We're all serious about this." He added the contestants are undergoing rigorous training for the local tilt, set Feb. 17 on GMA 7's "Walang Tulugan with the Master Showman."

Another well-applauded candidate, Iago Raterta, is a veteran model and semifinalist in the Manhunt International contest last year.

Deone Dasallas, a Biology (Master's degree) student at the University of the Philippines, said he hoped to dispel the belief that all Filipinos are dog eaters. Given the chance to represent the country, he said, "I will talk about the Philippine law that criminalizes the killing of dogs for food."

John Carlo Cruz of Quezon City dismissed observations that male pageants are merely a showcase of airheads. "That's unwarranted stereotyping," he said.

DOLLYWOOD

Lino speaks up on relationship with KC

By DOLLY ANNE CARVAJAL
INQUIRER

Cayetano

Concepcion

WHEN we printed the snapshot of KC Concepcion and Lino Cayetano (taken in DBay Hong Kong) in this space, I meant no malice. Mega's hija bonita and Direk are both so wholesome. Their families should not worry that a simple picture will make people jump to crazy conclusions about what they were doing in the Crown Colony together.

Just like many dating couples, they were just having good, clean fun. Mommy Mega has said her piece on TV. She cannot overemphasize the fact that KC and Lino did not spend a week in Hong Kong. Regardless how many weeks, days, hours or minutes they were together, the point is they made time for each other. So much love, so little time? It's immeasurable when your heart is in it.

Lino finally speaks up now. His text message: "I just want to clear up some things regarding your article. KC and her entire family went to Hong Kong before she flew to Paris. On their last day there, I surprised her and spent half a day with KC and her friends from HK Disneyland. Then she left for Paris na. We didn't spend a week there and we didn't do anything behind her family's back. We are genuinely still in the process of getting to know each other as well as getting to know each other's family and friends. I think that the most important aspect of starting a relationship is building the proper foundation.

"I am not in the habit of reacting to the press but through your widely read column, I am praying that some of these issues may be clarified as it is very important to me that the people I care about know that I care about the truth."

Oh, well. It doesn't really matter how little or how much time lovers (or would-be lovers) spend together. Apres tout, time stands still when you're with your beloved. Suddenly, all you hear is your heart beating and not the clock ticking. Love may or may not last so we should just cherish Cupid's gift of time.

Lessons in love

In honor of red hot (or red alert?!) V-day, here are some stars' lessons in love:

CESAR MONTANO: Always give your partner greater love than he or she gives you. Love begins at home.

PIOLO PASCUAL: Love has taught me to be selfless. There was a time I had to let go of someone I really loved but it was for our own good.

PAULEEN LUNA: Love can make or break you. It's a matter of taking risks so choose the person who's worth fighting for. God always gives happy endings. If it's not happy then it's not yet the end.

MARIEL RODRIGUEZ: Don't forget your friends. Sure, you want to spend time with your BF; but make sure you still have time for your friends because BFs come and go but friends are forever!

JOHN ESTRADA: When this girl I loved left because she thought it was the right thing to do and it would make her happy, I allowed it even if I didn't want to. Love makes you put the happiness of your loved one first.

RACHELANN GO: Never take the one who loves you for granted. Love him more than he deserves.

JOLINA MAGDANGAL: My long-distance relationship with Bebong for years taught me that love understands and therefore waits.

ALFRED VARGAS: Love transcends everything. It is the purpose of living. Love can hurt but sometimes it's a good hurt. And whether love gives joy or brings tears, it makes me feel that I'm alive.

When Erik met Rufa

CATCH real-life couple Erik Santos and Rufa Mae Quinto in "When Erik Met Rufa The Repeat … to the Max!" on Feb. 16, 9 p.m. at the Aliw Theater. Special guests are Ogie Alcasid, Ai-Ai de las Alas and the Hotlegs.

I teased RMQ: "When Erik Weds Rufa, coming soon? Will your plunging neckline be gone once you take the plunge?" Ms Bombshell laughs. "Slight! Siyempre pag Mrs na ako dapat for my husband's eyes only ang aking mga natural resources!"

So feast your eyes on Ruffa Mae while you still can. Call 911-5555.

Rome & Juliet

CINEMA One Originals presents the critically acclaimed digital film "Rome & Juliet" starting Feb. 14 at the Indie-Sine Theater of Robinsons Galleria. Starring Mylene Dizon and Andrea del Rosario and directed by Connie Macatuno, it follows the romantic journey of two straight women who plunge in forbidden love.

Andrea shares the most daring thing she has done for love: "I surprised my BF who was on a business trip halfway across the world. I called him up and told him I regret not being able to follow. Then 10 minutes later I showed up in his room wearing a sexy dress and had champagne delivered."

Ah! Love makes us all corny in unpredictable ways.

'Baliw'

AFTER graduating from New York University, Pinoy director Redd Ochoa received special acceptances at the Angels City and LA Film Festivals for his work "Mary." He has also worked with Academy Award winning director Vladimir Menshov on "Shirli Myrli."

Now, his first indie feature "Baliw" is scheduled to premiere this month here and abroad. Produced by Redd5Luke Entertainment, it stars Ryan Eigenmann, Joel Torre, Jaime Fabregas and an array of promising newcomers.

New image model

THE FRESHEST face on TV and the big screen, model-turned-actress Isabel Oli, is Cinderella's latest image model for 2007. Like the Cinderella fairytale, the shoe perfectly fits with Isabel. Her look can be transformed from contemporary to glamorous. Watch out for their sizzling summer campaign directed by Dona Cuna Pita.

PERSONAL: Happy V-day, H! Thanks for giving my heart a total makeover and taking it to a better place.

E-mail wateringholeshangrila@yahoo.com

Cleopatra

Delilah

Maria Clara

Eve

Iconic style

By APPLES ABERIN SADHWANI
INQUIRER

THE VERY FIRST FASHION icons were probably none other than Cleopatra, Delilah, Eve and Maria Clara (no, not Audrey, Jackie or Grace!). All four women, legendary or not, are remembered for the significant roles they played during their times, and their very distinct looks.

Cleopatra, a Greek royal who co-ruled Egypt with her father, Ptolemy XII Auletes, is widely known for her legendary looks and steely resolve. She is often portrayed as a woman with straight, jet-black hair and bronzed skin, who dressed in lavish, gold garb.

A famed leader during the Hellenistic rule in Egypt, she is known for forging an alliance between two of the most powerful men of her time, Caesar and Mark Antony.

Delilah represents the immense power woman have over men. Flemish baroque painter Rubens portrayed her as a buxom beauty in deep luscious red while various stories presented her as a sensual but shrewd woman. She used her charisma to find out classified information that unfortunately led to her lover Samson's downfall (not to mention hair loss).

The earliest female biblical figure, Eve, is also known for the use of her innate feminine charm—over Adam, that is. Who can ever forget that sorry tale of the apple and the serpent and the couple's exile from the Garden of Eden? Eve was the first woman to suffer the pain of childbirth and thus the first to take on the role of mother to the human race.

Maria Clara is our very own icon brought to life by national hero José Rizal in his book "Noli Me Tangere." Put on a pedestal for her self-effacing beauty, she represented the ideal Filipina who did not employ her power through overt action or sex appeal. Maria Clara portrayed humility and modesty, which only made her more alluring to those around her.

Metrobank Femme Visa, a credit card for contemporary women, chose these four stylish and memorable icons to depict various facets of womanhood. Common to these four characters are the undeniable beauty and power that each woman had and how these traits have secured their place in history and literature.

And who can better portray these legendary women than the darling of the Philippines' modeling scene, Grace Tagle? She entered the scene after winning the Elite Model Look and is now touted as one of the top models in the industry. Regionally acclaimed (she represented the country recently in the show "Love Asia"), she is known for her beauty and professionalism. A chameleon who can look fierce one moment and demure the next, Grace is indeed the perfect woman to embody such icons.

The Metrobank Femme Visa celebrates these women and others who dare to be on top. Take inspiration from these historical fashion icons and live the bold and beautiful life, while fulfilling your many roles and duties as a modern-day woman.

There are over 23 million business establishments worldwide that accept the Metrobank Femme Visa.

OPINYON

'Artista'

Someone asked me about it in an out-of-town talk recently. What did I think of the "artistas" [actors] running for public office?

I answered: I have no problems with actors going into politics so long as they are qualified for the job. Or so long as they prepare themselves for the job. I don't know why we should discriminate against a particular profession as being naturally inimical to public service. I don't see that being a lawyer, engineer, architect, businessman, doctor, or nurse better prepares one for it.

Acting, at its best, requires tremendous levels of professionalism and hard work, the kind you expect from public officials. If only by this, the right attitude would probably be to discriminate only against the bad actors, or the ones who are too lazy to improve their craft. If you can't be good in the profession you've embraced, you can't be good in one you want to screw.

Arguably, artistas carry with them an undue advantage, which is popularity. I use that category quite incidentally not just to refer to actors but to all those thrust into the public eye by media, including people in media themselves. Loren Legarda is the product of news media. As is Noli de Castro. I have little doubt that if Korina Sanchez ran for senator, she would win hands down. And to give credit where credit is due, I commend her for not doing so. It is an exercise in restraint worthy of emulation by others in her and kindred professions. Being popular alone is not a natural claim to public service, even if in this country it is an engraved invitation to it.

Arguably as well, artistas carry with them a lot of baggage when they come into public office. To this day, I cannot understand why we do not have a law banning public officials from engaging in private occupations, specifically artistas who become senators and mayors or get into other elected positions and continue to do movies or appear on TV. Many years ago, an actor-turned-mayor-turned-actor justified it in a talk show by saying that he did it so he could earn extra income to give to his constituents. His official budget, he said, was not enough. He had to resort to acting to give food and medicine to the poor.

I was in the same talk show and was absolutely dumbfounded by what he said. There is really no defense against someone who lies epically in public other than to exclaim, "What a load of bull!" Not being one to do that, I just said with all the irony I could muster, which was probably lost on the viewers, "I believe you are the outstanding exception in that respect."

The only thing I can really suggest is that we turn a more discriminating eye on the artistas rather than frown on them to a man or woman. Some of them have been passionately engaged these past years in political causes, not least in protesting the rule of someone who never won the elections. I don't know why they should be ignored or dismissed simply for belonging to a profession that is given to faking reality when we have in sheer abundance people belonging to other professions, among them economists, who have made a career of realizing fakeness.

A foreign correspondent once asked me what the difference was between Arroyo and Estrada, given that both of them have messed up the country. I said Estrada wanted power and wealth for what they could bring him while Arroyo wants power and wealth period.

Which brings me to a crucial point, one we should examine deathly seriously. That is that the people who are most strident in warning us against the artistas are in fact the "trapos" [traditional politicians]. By all means beware of artistas offering genuineness, but even more so beware of trapos guaranteeing fakeness. Between the dumbest artista and the cleverest trapo, I'd take the first anytime.

The harm that the artista can do is nothing compared to the harm that the trapo can do. I never bought Joker Arroyo's contention some years ago that it was better to vote for Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo rather than Fernando Poe Jr. because there was a constitutional remedy for corruption (impeachment) but none for stupidity. There may be a constitutional remedy for corruption, but the epically corrupt—the kind that robs a country's soul and not just its body—can always trash the Constitution. In fact, they can always trash the vote. Gloria Arroyo did. She trashed the vote and she trashed the Constitution.

There's The Rub
By CONRADO DE QUIROS
PHILIPPINE DAILY INQUIRER

Between Arroyo and Poe, I'd pick Poe anytime. Between Jose de Venecia and Joseph Estrada, I'd pick Estrada anytime. In a country where public officials are dedicated to ripping off the citizens— a fact easily seen in the fortunes candidates spend to get elected, an investment they mean to recoup at usurious interest rates—lack of brains is a veritable virtue in public office. Less brains, less pillage. Less brains, less ruination.

A foreign correspondent once asked me what the difference was between Arroyo and Estrada, given that both of them have messed up the country. I said Estrada wanted power and wealth for what they could bring him while Arroyo wants power and wealth period. For Estrada, power and wealth are the means to pleasure, for Arroyo pursuing power and wealth is the pleasure and attaining them, the climax. What's true of Estrada and Arroyo is true as well in a general way of the artistas and the trapos.

Look at the trapos in power today. Look at Gloria Arroyo and Mike Arroyo, look at their children, look at their official family, which includes Raul Gonzalez and Ronaldo Puno; look at De Venecia, the two prosperous buffoons Pichay and Nograles, and at the two Bicolanos after whom God sent two superstorms to Bicol to try to seek out, Luis Villafuerte and Edcel Lagman, and their ilk. Look at the trapos running in the administration ticket. Look at them and ask yourself if the artistas constitute the real threat to society today.

The artistas can only mount a parody, the trapos can mount a tyranny. The artistas can only trot out an enchanted kingdom draped in tinsel, the trapos can build an Enchanted Kingdom strung with barbed wire.

Ah, but surely we have people who are neither artistas nor trapos? Yes, we do. But that's quite another story, or column.

PINOY KASI

Pig year

By MICHAEL TAN
INQUIRER

Emblazoned on a bright red piece of cloth, the Chinese words seemed almost outrageous: "May your pig activities be successful."

But I suspected the words were intended to mean something propitious. When I asked my father, he confirmed that it was another one of those play on words that the Chinese are so fond of. The Putonghua (Mandarin) word for pig is read as "zhu," which has a homonym -- a word with a similar sound -- that means "all." So "pig activities" actually meant "all activities," a kind of generic wish-you-well greeting for the new lunar year, which starts on Feb. 18. This new year, in the Chinese animal zodiac, belongs to the pig, a much-loved animal in our part of the world, although for reasons that don't quite coincide with Valentine's.

Prestige animal

Genetic studies indicate that pigs were domesticated independently in at least five areas: Central Europe, Italy, Northern India, mainland Southeast Asia and maybe even islands in Southeast Asia (that's us). Their domestication came about as people began to settle down to farm, probably not wanting anymore to go off hunting for wild pigs.

Today, in China, mainland Southeast Asia and much of the Western Pacific, the pig is a prestige animal, people's status and wealth indicated by the number of pigs they have. It is sacrificed in religious rituals, used for bride price (I can imagine women boasting about how many pigs they were worth) and, most importantly, consumed in communal feasts and celebrations, with various ethnic groups coming up with their own version of "lechon" [roasted pig]. Some say the secret to Chinese cooking is its use of pork fat, no matter what the dish is and that might even include so-called vegetarian dishes.

When the Spaniards arrived in the Philippines, they found the "indio" natives already addicted to pork. The Jesuit Ignacio Francisco Alcina, writing in 1668 about the Visayas, had this observations on the local "puercos" [swine]: "...there are many, of great varieties, some better than others and of finer qualities than those in Spain... While in Spain the mutton is served as fresh meat and is sold and slaughtered without distinction, for every class of people and it is used by them and even the infirm who are unable to buy hens."

The Visayans ate wild and domestic pigs, as well as a "mestizo" [half-breed] variety they called the "bayong," which Alcina said was "better than either of the wild ones or the domestic."

One domesticated variety was called "Ilocos," which he believed might be the largest pig not only on the islands but also "perhaps in all the rest of the world."

The domesticated pigs were said to be very fertile, bearing litters twice a year (some of them "three times in 13 months," Alcina said). A curious bit of information that might interest veterinarians: Alcina said that the female runts that were smaller than their siblings were actually prized and given special care because they tended to be more fertile than the regular-size littermates.

The Filipino craving for pork has grown through the centuries, as it has in much of Southeast Asia. Even the poorest families will find ways occasionally to include a few pieces of pork in a meal, and when money is available, it will go quickly into a lechon.

It's not just in Asia and the Pacific where the pig figures prominently as food and, by extension, as a symbol of affluence, if not profligacy. English has expressions like "bringing home the bacon" and the infamous "pork barrel," which we Filipinos know only too well.

Profane

The appetite for pork is not universal. The book of Leviticus prohibits pork, seeing pigs as "unnatural" because they are cloven-footed like cows and goats and yet do not "chew the cud" (in simpler words, eat grass). Muslims and more orthodox Jews still prohibit pork, as do some Christian sects, like the Seventh Day Adventists.

In our part of the world, we have the paradox of populations divided by pork: pig-crazy Christian Filipinos living side by side with Muslim Filipinos who find pork disgusting. South of the Philippines is Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim country, where pork is "haram" [forbidden] for most of the population, but relished by non-Muslim Indonesians, especially the Chinese.

So offensive is the pig to Muslims that the Chinese government recently banned "Year of the Pig" advertisements to avoid offending the increasingly restive Chinese Muslims.

The prohibition on pork is usually explained as avoiding the "dirty" pig, but anthropologists have another explanation: the pig, in the arid environment of the Middle East, competed with humans for precious water and grains, making it less ideal as a food animal compared to goats and sheep, which could live on grass and on little water.

In our part of the world, pigs have been easy to raise because we have abundant access to water. And before they began to be raised in piggeries in closed pens, our pigs were quite self-sufficient, foraging on their own for root crops and eating food leftovers from humans.

Pet pigs

Pigs used to be slaughtered only on special occasions. These days, pork is consumed almost every day in various forms: bacon for breakfast, "chicharon" [crisp-fried skin and innards] for snack, "liempo" [belly] for dinner, churning up cholesterol levels and contributing to cardiovascular diseases.

The hog industry has been trying to breed pigs that are leaner, but I don't know how far they'll get. They probably don't have to worry yet, given that the Chinese, Filipinos and other Southeast Asians aren't about to give up pork yet.

But there may be more reasons than health to give up pork. The "Babe" films have helped to project pigs as quite endearing and intelligent. I still remember that back in vet school, one of our professors, Dr. Salvador Escudero III (yes, the father of the fighting Chiz Escudero), telling our class pigs could be toilet-trained.

Again, Alcina's 17th-century historical account is intriguing in its description of what sounds like a pet pig: "The natives call these 'jubo' and they are accustomed to tame them so well that they sleep by the sides of their beds, and almost eat with them from the same plate." Alcina says he had one such pig that "walked among us like a little dog. They are much more clean, even though pigs, than are the dogs."

I've wondered if this "jubo" might have been a variety of the potbelly pig, which has a growing number of fans in different countries, including the Philippines. The potbelly pig actually originated in Southeast Asia, most probably Vietnam. It's now raised in farms in the United States and Canada and sold as pet. You can see them at the Manila Zoo in a special section for kids.

There's still time to make another new year's resolution. We might want to join the call of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals to put an end to the slaughter of pigs. I'd go further and say let's reinvent the pig and put it through a second domestication -- this time to turn them into pets.

SAMU'T SARI

JACQUELINE HERNANDEZ

Saipan Singing Superstar third place and the PTI Text Star of the Night Paul Dujua poses beside the "golden pig" displayed at the lobby of the Saipan Grand Hotel after participating at the Singing Sweetheart Sensation.

JACQUELINE HERNANDEZ

Saipan Singing Superstar Grand winner Lala Nodado hits high notes as she serenades the audience during her special performance at the Saipan Grand Hotel's "Singing Sweetheart Sensation".

JACQUELINE HERNANDEZ

Jayson Roman and his singing partner show what they've got during the "Singing Sweetheart Sensation," a singing competition for duets at the Saipan Grand Hotel.

JACQUELINE HERNANDEZ

Saipan Singing Superstar second place Angel Tumada wows the crowd with her singing prowess during the Saipan Grand Hotel's "Singing Sweetheart Sensation" last Saturday night.

Macoi Aguda and Moody Binuya serenade the audience with a love song during the Saipan Grand Hotel's "Singing Sweetheart Sensation".

JACQUELINE HERNANDEZ

CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

LEAVING ISLAND

The family of Jerry and Gina Jaraplasan, first and second left, will be leaving the island next week. The family is moving to Guam after a short stay in the Philippines. The couple poses here with son Gian [daugthter CJ not in picture] and parents Josie and Manny Jaraplasan.

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